Creating Equitable Learning Environments: An Equity Literacy Approach

Paul C. Gorski
@pgorski (Twitter)
gorski@edchange.org

Katy Swalwell
swalwell@iastate.edu
STARTING ASSUMPTIONS

• All students deserve access to the best possible education we can provide for them, regardless of their race, class, gender, and so on.

• A combination of bias and inequity means that this access is not equally distributed.

• Everybody in the room has good intentions and the power to help change this reality, but good intentions are not enough.

• We don’t have the power to change everything, but we have the power to change some things.
OUR OBJECTIVE

What is the knowledge I need to become a threat to the existence of inequity in my spheres of influence?

Do I have the will to be that threat?

It’s a lens, not just a list of practical actions.
ONE MORE THING...

• Talking about issues that are related to oppression and inequity can be uncomfortable.

• *However, it’s not more uncomfortable than experiencing oppression* and then *experiencing silence about oppression*.

• So, *discomfort is not a reasonable excuse*—especially given our chosen profession.

• This is *privilege*—avoiding the discussion about oppression because of my discomfort when my students can’t avoid *actual oppression*. 
BIRTH OF EQUITY LITERACY
BIRTH OF EQUITY LITERACY
“Diversity Friends Day”

Are they going to do anything about racism?
“Diversity Friends Day”

Is “cultural diversity” for white people?
BIRTH OF EQUITY LITERACY

• It’s not (usually) about intentionally oppressive educators
• It’s about learning to see what we’re socialized not to see … and doing something about it
THE WORST KIND OF TROUBLE

The problem is *NOT*:

- A lack of people who value "diversity"
- A lack of "multicultural" curricula
- A lack of well-intentioned educators
The problem is primarily ideological in how these “strategies” get applied and enacted.
EQUITY LITERACY

Four Abilities

1. Ability to **recognize** inequity
2. Ability to **respond** to inequity
3. Ability to **redress** inequity
4. Ability to **sustain** equity
Domains of Equity

- Curriculum and Instruction
- Traditions and Norms
- Rules and Policies
WHAT IS EQUITY?

Inequity is unequal distribution of access and opportunity, including access and opportunity to material and non-material resources.

So equity requires a redistribution—not a mitigation, not an add-on program, but a structural redistribution of access and opportunity.
# EQUITY IDEOLOGIES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><strong>RATIONALE</strong></th>
<th><strong>SOLUTION</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>DEFICIT</strong></td>
<td>Problem is within the individual.</td>
<td>Fix the individual.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(e.g., Ruby Payne)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>GRIT</strong></td>
<td>Problem is structural.</td>
<td>Fix the individual.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>STRUCTURAL</strong></td>
<td>Problem is structural.</td>
<td>Fix the structural.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Don’t just tell a different version of the same story.
Change The Story!
Expect discomfort and even pushback from people who benefit from structural inequity.
INTEREST CONVERGENCE THEORY

The theory: People with privilege invest in equity when progress toward equity converges with their interests.

The implication: When we move beyond celebrating diversity and toward the redistribution of opportunity, most people with privileged identities scatter. Or when we move from “diversity” curriculum to social justice curriculum…

Bell (1980)
The *critical* shift from *mitigating* to *eliminating* inequity…

We cannot mitigate our way to equity. We cannot multicultural arts fair our way to racial justice in schools.
EXAMPLES

1. Policies that punish marginalized students (LGBT youth and absenteeism)

2. Practices that humiliate marginalized students (school activities that cost extra $)

3. “Diversity” programs or curricula that force marginalized students to “teach” about their experiences to others with no guarantee of their marginalization being addressed
What We Can Do

A Few Best Practices at the School Level for Equitable Education

Which, oddly, turn out to be best practices in general… for ALL students.
“It is people from dominant groups, after all, who tend to be the most misled, miseducated citizens when it comes to sociopolitical and sociohistorical realities (Nieto, 2000).”

Gorski (2006)
RECOGNIZE
RESPOND
REDRESS
SUSTAIN
1) Examine all **curriculum** and **learning materials** for bias and misinformation that perpetuate and normalize inequity.
Examine all **school traditions and opportunities** for bias that perpetuate and normalize inequity.
2) Learn to pronounce every student’s full, given name properly

The Lasting Impact of Mispronouncing Students’ Names
(Clarke McLaughlin, NEA Today, September 1, 2016)
3) Integrate “diversity” and equity into the curriculum across all disciplines

- Students respond better when it is woven in rather than introduced as a supplement or add-on during a special month or celebration.
- Important for ALL students.
4) Institute higher-order pedagogies

- Students who are “under-performing” show immediate improvement when given access to the same sorts of pedagogies as their “high-achieving” peers
- Meanwhile, students demonstrate least engagement and lowest levels of learning based on “direct instruction”
5) Be thoughtful with technology

- Be careful about homework
- Be careful about how we get information to families
6) Reach out to families early and often … and listen to them

- Marginalized families tend to hear from the teacher only when something is wrong, creating an adversarial or negative relationship with the school.
7) Involve families in accessible ways

- Make sure opportunities for family involvement are accessible to all families.
8) Avoid tokenism

- Be careful not to put marginalized students in a position to have to educate their peers about “diversity” (especially if you’re not also guaranteeing those students equity)
9) Enact Equitable Policy

- Make sure classroom and school policies don’t punish people for ways they are marginalized (e.g., attendance policies, weighted homework policies, fundraisers, book fairs)
- Stop humiliating students!
10) Support (not suppress) the doers

- Explicitly support colleagues, students, and community members who are stepping up
- Avoid spending more energy arguing with people about how they asked for equity than working towards equity
- Avoid disproportionately quick and deep responses to people resisting equity efforts
11) Hire people with a demonstrated, explicit equity lens

- Ask about their commitments in interviews and do not hire people with a deficit lens (e.g., “In your view, why do low-income students on average not do as well as in school their wealthier peers?”)
12) Insist on PD that centers equity (not just culture)
12) Insist on PD that centers equity (not just culture)

Email Professor Gale Seiler, head of the ISU Education for Social Justice Graduate Certificate at gseiler@iastate.edu for more information on K-12 PD for entire schools and all subject areas.
MORE THAN ANYTHING...

Wrap a commitment to equity into every conversation, every practice, and every policy.

As you review or make decisions, ask yourself…

“Is this policy and practice considerate of and/or based on the needs of the most marginalized families?”
HISTORICAL CASE IN IOWA
Racial Disparities in School Discipline

Black students are 3-4 times more likely than their white peers to be expelled or face multiple suspensions from school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk of Being Expelled</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>White</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Risk of Facing Multiple Suspensions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, Civil Rights Data Collection, 2009-10

American Institutes for Research | www.air.org
Brainstorming
A Few Final Reflections
“I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the ... Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice,”

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963)
“who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice. ...”

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963)
“Shallow understanding from people of goodwill is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will.

Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.”

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963)
“... [W]e must stop being silent, become more comfortable with conflict, and approach the issues of our day with the same passion that’s used to institute racism through discriminatory policies and attitudes. Iowa Nice just won’t cut it anymore.”

Robert Gutsche (2012)
Thank you.

Paul C. Gorski
gorski@edchange.org
Twitter: @pgorski
http://www.edchange.org

Katy Swalwell
swalwell@iastate.edu